DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 337 192 IR 053 794

AUTHOR Shea, Quinlan J., Jr.
TITLE The White House Conference on Library and Information Services 1991. Theme Statements.
INSTITUTION White House Conference on Library and Information Services.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the White House Conference on Library and Information Services (2nd, Washington, DC, July 9-13, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Information; *Democracy; Economic Development; Information Needs; Library Role; Library Services; *Literacy; *Productivity; Public Policy; Technological Advancement; User Needs (Information)
IDENTIFIERS *White House Conference Library Info Services

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the roles and responsibilities of the delegates to the 1991 White House Conference on Library and Information Services (WHCLIS2), which revolve around the three conference themes: Literacy, Democracy, and Productivity. These themes form the three major sections of this paper. The first section discusses how library and information services can be used to fight both total and functional illiteracy. An expanded definition of literacy is referred to which is inclusive of a wide range of literacies, i.e., cultural, information, technical, computer, and global. The second section notes that national productivity must increase in order to improve and maintain U.S. economic strength. It is observed that information has become an important element to U.S. economic activity, and it is only through equitable access to information that an increase in national productivity can occur. The third section argues that information is the basis upon which a democratic government makes decisions, and that information is also the basis for the monitoring of the actions of government by the populace. It is posited that both the public and the government need access to accurate information in order to ensure democracy's survival. Concluding the paper are eight suggested recommendations for public policy and a copy of the "Principles of Public Information," a statement adopted by the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science on June 29, 1990. (MAB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED337192

THE WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE

ON

LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES

1991

THEME STATEMENTS

PREFACE

FOREWORD

LITERACY

PRODUCTIVITY

DEMOCRACY

SUGGESTED STATEMENTS
OF PUBLIC POLICY

Quinlan J. Shea, Jr.

1205374

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PREFACE

"Education makes us what we are."

C.-A. Helvétius
Discours XXX, ch. 30

Our country and world have changed to an almost unbelievable extent during our lifetimes, and the pace of that change is constantly increasing. The responsibility we face as delegates to this Conference, to foresee the information needs of America in the 21st Century and to recommend the policies and actions that will best enable our country to meet and overcome the challenges that lie before us, is an awesome one. But it gives us a splendid opportunity to make an important contribution to the continued success of this noble experiment called the United States of America. We need to consider the proposals before us in that spirit, in a collective effort to serve what President Bush has called ". . . this great cause -- one that means so much to our nation and is so close to our hearts."

FOREWORD

"The first requisite of a good citizen
in this Republic of ours is that he shall
be able and willing to pull his weight."

Theodore Roosevelt
New York, Nov. 11, 1902

The 21st Century will begin in less than ten years, and there is no way for us to know with any certainty what either our country or our world will be like in the year 2001. This Conference has been called by President Bush and the Congress because of two things we do know. First, what we as a nation do or fail to do in the intervening years to expand literacy, increase productivity, and strengthen democracy in our country will have a very real effect, positive or negative, on both the quality of life in America, and on the nature of the role that the United States will play in this future world that will be so quickly upon us. And, second, that library and information services must be an important part of our national effort to overcome the challenges that lie before us. To help ensure success in that effort, this Conference should recommend strong public policies and actions to the President and Congress, and to the people of our nation.

The three distinct themes of this Conference -- library and information services for democracy, library and information services for productivity, and library and information services for literacy --

are so inter-related in the everyday life of our country that it is impossible to separate them completely. For example, our democratic government does not fear a literate, informed, and thinking populace, the members of which freely express opinions on the issues of the day. In fact, we recognize that a truly democratic government cannot be expected to function, endure, and succeed unless its citizens are capable of understanding the problems confronting society, and able to contribute fully to the process of governance that seeks to solve them. That same literate, informed, and thinking populace, with each citizen capable of contributing to our nation's economic productivity to the extent of his or her ability, will in turn produce a standard of living and a quality of life that will both strengthen democracy and encourage learning.

With these as our themes, it is entirely fitting that we convene this Conference in the 200th Anniversary Year of the Bill of Rights of our Constitution. As delegates, we have the responsibility to identify the specific issues, raise the specific concerns, and ask the specific questions we conclude should be addressed. Then we must determine the public policies we believe should be adopted and the actions we believe should be taken by our country to enable library and information services to help expand literacy among our people, increase our productivity and economic strength as a nation, and preserve and strengthen democracy in what we all believe is the greatest country in the world. Finally, we must state those proposals so clearly and so logically that they will attract support

from individual citizens, and from executive and legislative officials at all levels of government.

As First Lady Barbara Bush noted recently in a talk at the Library of Congress, slightly more than one hundred and seventy years ago a group of Virginians, including James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, came together to formulate what they called the objects of primary education. The first of these objects, only slightly amended by Mrs. Bush, was to give every citizen the information he -- or she -- needs for the transaction of his -- or her -- own daily business.

At the recent, historic education conference convened by President Bush in Charlottesville, Virginia, he and the Governors of the fifty states called for the establishment of national performance goals for education. In his State of the Union Address on January 31, 1990, the President unveiled those goals, one of which is that,

> "By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship."

We are dealing here with nothing less than the American dream: that every citizen will have the opportunity to advance in our society as far as her or his ability and willingness to work will allow. Library and information services have long been a vital part of the effort to make that dream a reality for all our citizens. Given the challenges facing our nation, the pursuit of that goal becomes even more important now than it has been in the past. We are Americans concerned about those challenges, and about how library and information services can best help to meet them. But in a very real

sense, we have come together to consider what public policies are needed and what actions should be taken in our country as part of a serious national effort to make the American dream a reality in the 21st Century.

LITERACY

"My early and invincible love of reading, which I would not exchange for the treasures of India."

Edward Gibbon
Autobiography

America continues to become an information-intensive society, more and more closely integrated into a global economic community. Given the challenges we will face in the 1990's and the 21st Century, can we afford to have a large portion of our population incapable of effective participation in either our society or our economy?

Many people in this country cannot read and write. Many others read and write at such a minimal level that they are fairly described as functionally illiterate. All of these persons survive, but they do so in ways barely comprehensible to the majority of Americans; they simply cannot cope successfully with our complex modern society. The shocking fact is that our rate of literacy ranks behind approximately one-third of the other members of the United Nations. What might we achieve as a nation if all of our people were contributing as fully as they could to our society, and to our economy?

Many, but by no means all, of the Americans held back by illiteracy are found in one or more of such groups as persons on

welfare, prison inmates, very low income families, high school dropouts, minority youth, and mothers receiving Aid for Dependent Children. Illiteracy also accounts for the fact that many unskilled and semi-skilled workers have no advancement potential, and that many persons who lose jobs are unable to find new ones.

All too often we limit ourselves to thinking about these and other groups as groups, and to seeing them as social problems. We forget that groups are made up of individuals, and that for many of the people in the groups illiteracy is at least a major contributing cause of which the "social problem" is but an effect. Viewed from this perspective, it is much easier to see both the huge economic dimension of the situation, and how literacy and follow-on educational efforts can help to meet America's need for a significant increase in productivity in the coming years.

To take but one specific example, a direct correlation has been shown to exist between literacy skills and the ability of young adults to function as productive members of our society. If this nation continues to do little more than seek to palliate the social effects of illiteracy -- deal with them as social problems, instead of giving illiterate persons the chance to become contributors to our economic strength -- the likely consequences for America are frightening. We will find ourselves in the 21st Century with a work force that is largely without the skills necessary for this country to be a competitive player in the international marketplace. Not all

of the problems confronting our country would be solved if we were able to eradicate illiteracy, but some of them would be solved, and many others would be diminished in terms of the negative impact on the individuals involved and on our society as a whole.

Even as we begin to consider how library and information services can best be used to fight both total and functional illiteracy, should not our national goals in this area actually be set much higher? If achieving an acceptable level of basic literacy throughout our society would be a significant change for the better, what could we accomplish if we expanded the definition of literacy to include an array of literacies, such as cultural, information, technical, computer, and global? If, for example, persons are going to be truly successful and productive as workers, consumers, voters, and parents, they must be able to "read" new information, that is, to access and understand it, to comprehend its significance in light of their previous knowledge and experience, and to apply it effectively. This need for information competence will be even more acute in the coming years.

Understood in this broader and deeper sense, literacy would only begin with the ability to read and write; it would extend to achieving competence in the use and management of information. At this point we could fairly say that our recommended literacy goal for the United States is nothing less than giving everyone the chance to achieve his or her full potential as a person, an essential

precondition to helping to strengthen our country's economic productivity and participatory democracy.

Even if we agree that all Americans should be able to find useful information quickly, and apply it effectively, and recommend that achieving this level of information competence be recognized as a national goal, we then must recommend specific actions to achieve that goal. In doing so, we should first identify those actions that will best enable libraries and all other providers of information services to help all Americans achieve basic literacy. Then, recognizing that the ability to find and use information is an essential skill for full participation in our economy and society, we should recommend actions to achieve expanded literacy.

Special attention should be given to recommending actions that will assist groups and individuals who, as a matter of fact, are disadvantaged in terms of the ability or opportunity to take advantage of available options for achieving either basic or expanded literacy.

As a final point, it is hard to envision success for our efforts in this area without close cooperation between the public and private sectors. Neither has a monopoly on the talents and skills necessary for success in this vitally important effort, or on the will to succeed in it.

Whether we speak of the problem of illiteracy, or of the goal of literacy, we can see a need for action by our country that is, quite

literally, awesome in its magnitude. As we seek to build on what has gone before, and what is happening now -- such as "1991: The Year of the Lifetime Reader", a Library of Congress initiative chaired by First Lady Barbara Bush -- we must measure that need, and fit our recommendations to it. Useful approaches may be simple or complex; timid ones will do no good at all, and will leave many of our people unable to participate in the American dream.

PRODUCTIVITY

"Perfect freedom is reserved for the man who lives by his own work, and in that work does what he wants to do."

R. G. Collingwood
Speculum Mentis, Prologue

Productivity, as an economic concept, is the measurement of work output in two categories: goods and services. As a result of the changes that are occurring in the American economy and in the global economy of which it is a part, the line between these two categories of work output has become increasingly blurred. When we focus on the areas of high-value, specialized work that are more and more critical to America's economic well-being, any meaningful line between them has completely disappeared.

No matter how we label the various segments of our economic activity, however, or seek to measure their output, one important proposition remains unchanged. It is that increasing our nation's productivity -- more output per worker, per hour on the job -- is essential to improving, or even maintaining, our economic strength. During the 1950's and 60's, for example, America's productivity rose at an annual rate in excess of 2.5%. From 1982-88, however, the rate of increase dropped to 1.6% per year, and in 1989 and 1990, our

productivity actually declined, by 0.7% and 0.8% respectively. Individual economists and economic policy experts may disagree somewhat as to the precise causes and implications of this long-term trend, but not on its overall negative impact on our society. Our Conference is convening at a critical time in the economic history of America, a fact that increases both the importance of our work and its potential benefit to our country. We need to recommend actions that will allow library and information services to help our country to be more productive in the 1990's and the 21st Century.

In simpler times, the elements of economic activity were considered to be land, labor, and capital. In today's high-technology, information-driven society, we know that information itself has become a fourth element, and, in many segments of our economy, the most important element. As we saw in the discussion of literacy, the quality of our labor force -- the human resources available to our country as we seek to maintain and improve our economic condition -- is also becoming more and more important as the nature of the work process itself keeps changing, and the complexity of that process keeps increasing.

Success in today's various work environments is probably more dependent on the ability to make good decisions, in timely fashion, than on any other single factor. The elements of the decision-making process have not really changed. There continues to be the need to recognize the existence of a problem, identify the precise nature of that problem, obtain access to the right information as quickly as

possible, make the judgments and decisions necessary to solve the problem, take the necessary action, and get on with productive work. What has changed, almost in kind, is the complexity of the problems that have to be solved, and of the decisions that have to be made.

Far more often than was true in even the recent past, the nature of today's problems is such that different persons must become involved at the different stages of the problem-solving and decision-making processes. It nonetheless seems clear that the more all of our workers are prepared to function in this kind of environment, the greater will be our nation's productivity -- if those workers are in fact able to get access to the right information, when they need it.

A key aspect of this entire process is avoiding information overload. You need to obtain access to the information that will actually be useful to you in solving your problem, or making your decision, as opposed to that which is only superficially relevant.

As we decide what actions to recommend to ensure that the library and information services necessary to meet the needs of America's business community in the 1990's and beyond will be available, we need to remember the tremendous diversity that exists within that community. We are talking about entities that range in size from corporations with a global presence to individuals working out of their own homes. They engage in every kind of business activity one can imagine. All of them contribute to our country's productivity, and the diverse, potential information needs of all of

them are appropriate grist for this Conference's mill -- even though forecasting those needs with any precision is impossible. Fortunately, there is a similarity among these entities that is more important than all of the differences. Time is always of the essence in a competitive environment, whether the specific competitive arena involved is a city or the world. We may not be able to anticipate the information needs of the business community of the future with precision, but we do know that ease and speed of accessing needed information at a reasonable cost will be of critical importance in helping to improve America's productivity.

The needs of small businesses in our country merit special attention in one particular respect. For reasons of both convenience and cost, local public libraries are their information resource of choice, and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Given the importance of the small business sector to America's economy -- it employs over 50% of our total work force -- we should consider how best to maintain and strengthen the ability of local public libraries to continue to play this vital role in our nation's economic life.

As we formulate our recommendations in the productivity area, we should again bear in mind the need to encourage the maximum possible cooperation between the public and private sectors. As in the effort to strengthen literacy, there are critical roles to be played by both of them, and it is highly likely that our efforts will fail without the full participation of each.

As a final point, we must recognize that there are going to be communities and individuals that will not, for cost or other reasons, have access to sophisticated equipment and information products. What library and information services should we ensure are available to all Americans, to enable them to participate meaningfully in the economic life of our country as both producers and consumers, and thereby contribute to our economic strength?

DEMOCRACY

"Give me the liberty to know, to utter,
and to argue freely according to conscience,
above all liberties."

John Milton
Areopagitica

When we focus on library and information services for democracy in a complex information society, we quickly realize that there are two very different dimensions to this theme. The first is that information is the basis on which our society, acting through our Federal, State, and Local Governments, makes decisions, solves problems, and takes actions. The second is that information is also the basis on which "We the People" monitor, and ultimately control, the actions of those who govern in our name.

At the level of any one of our Governments, it is very difficult to make the right decisions and come up with the right solutions to problems that are themselves becoming increasingly more complex. In one important sense, the information needs of the Governments in the United States are very much like those of our businesses, as discussed in the theme statement on productivity. Governments also need access to useful information, as quickly as possible, once a problem or the need to make a decision has been identified. As we attempt to provide for the information needs of our Governments in

the 1990's and the 21st Century, another similarity to business becomes apparent: the near impossibility of forecasting with any precision what actual information will be needed.

It was not too many years ago that we would not have foreseen the immensity of the problem confronting our nation regarding the disposition of nuclear waste, or our local communities regarding the disposition of ordinary trash. We are not even agreed on what the questions are in the environmental area today, let alone on answers to those questions; given this situation today, how can we realistically anticipate the specific questions our Governments will be asking in ten or twenty years involving the quality of our land, water, air, and life?

It is highly likely that the best we can do for our Governments of the future is to ensure that the broadest and deepest range of information possible is in fact available, and that the information they actually do need at any given time will be quickly and easily accessible, at reasonable cost.

We want our Governments to make correct decisions, and reach the right solutions to problems. Reasoned differences of opinion regarding the merits of actions taken by our Governments are supposed to determine the results of our elections. For that system to work, however, requires what Jefferson called an "informed and educated" populace. When we turn our attention to information as the basis on which the people monitor the actions of their Governments, we realize

very quickly that much of the information necessary for that specific purpose is held by the Governments we seek to monitor. Those Governments are, all too often, unwilling to grant access to the information, and this reluctance to facilitate informed public scrutiny has led to the passage of the Federal Freedom of Information Act, and comparable legislation in many states. Even in the face of these laws, Governments do not always release the needed information in timely fashion.

The U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, after public hearings and public deliberation, unanimously adopted in June 1990 a group of "Principles of Public Information". The Commission defined "public information" as information created, compiled, and/or maintained by the Federal Government. Noting that open and uninhibited access to public information ensures good government and a free society, the Commission asserted that public information is owned by the people, held in trust by their Government, and should be available to the people except where access is restricted by law.

The eight specific Principles encompass the public's right of access to public information; the integrity and preservation of public information; the dissemination, reproduction, and redistribution of public information; the need to protect the privacy of persons who use or request access to information, or about whom information exists in Government records; the need for a wide diversity of sources of access to public information, private as well

as governmental; the need to ensure that cost does not obstruct the public's access to public information; the need for a single index to public information; and the need to guarantee public access to public information through national networks and programs like the Depository Library Program.

The Commission is a Federal Agency, and the Principles dealt specifically only with information in the possession of the Federal Government. Nonetheless, the Commission urged State and Local Governments, and the private sector, to utilize the Principles in the development of information policies and in the creation, use, dissemination, and preservation of public information. Moreover, the Report of the Commission's Ad Hoc Information Policies Committee that proposed adoption of the Principles noted that they reflected the consensus view that there should be the maximum possible access to public information. That Report also noted that nothing in the proposals would undercut any lawful authority for an agency to deny access to requested information, but expressed the hope that discretion under the law to release or deny access to information would be exercised in favor of disclosure, except where there would be resulting harm to the public interest.

In formulating our recommendations concerning library and information services for democracy, we should seek to ensure that our Governments will have access to the information needed to act for the people, and that the people will have access to the information needed to monitor the activities of their Governments.

No matter how often we may read them, we should never forget the words of James Madison -- words that could have been written with this theme and this Conference in mind:

> "A popular Government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

SUGGESTED STATEMENTS OF PUBLIC POLICY

The following are eight suggested statements of public policy that the Conference could recommend to the President and Congress.

(1) Illiteracy should be eliminated in the United States during the 1990's.

(2) Recognizing the huge economic dimension of illiteracy, and the need for a 21st Century work force with the productive skills necessary to enable the United States to compete successfully in a global economy, we should expand our definition of literacy to include the broad array of literacies required to give every American the opportunity to achieve his or her full potential as a person.

(3) All of our Governments and the American business community should have quick and easy access, at reasonable cost, to the broadest and deepest range of information possible, during the 1990's and beyond.

(4) All Americans should have access to sufficient library and information services to enable them to participate meaningfully in

the life of our country as citizens and voters, thereby strengthening our democracy, and as producers and consumers, thereby contributing to our economic success.

(5) The ability of America's local public libraries to serve as the information resource of choice for our nation's small business sector should be maintained and strenghtened.

(6) Full participation by, and close cooperation between, the public and private sectors is essential to a successful effort to expand literacy, increase productivity, and strengthen democracy in America, and thereby to overcome the challenges confronting our nation as we approach the 21st Century.

(7) Information created, compiled, and/or maintained by any of our Governments should be available to the People to the maximum possible extent, that is, except where disclosure is specifically prohibited by law or would result in harm to the public interest that outweighs the need for an informed public.

(8) The "Principles of Public Information" adopted by the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science on June 29, 1990, should be the basis for all decisions by any of our Governments, and the private sector, in developing information policies and in the creation, use, dissemination, and preservation of Public Information. (The full text of the "Principles of Public Information" is attached.)

Principles of Public Information

Preamble

From the birth of our nation, open and uninhibited access to public information has ensured good government and a free society. Public information helps to educate our people, stimulate our progress and solve our most complex economic, scientific and social problems. With the coming of the Information Age and its many new technologies, however, public information has expanded so quickly that basic principles regarding its creation, use and dissemination are in danger of being neglected and even forgotten.

The National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, therefore, reaffirms that the information policies of the U.S. government are based on the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution, and on the recognition of public information as a national resource to be developed and preserved in the public interest. We define ***public information*** as information created, compiled and/or maintained by the Federal Government. We assert that public information is information owned by the people, held in trust by their government, and should be available to the people except where restricted by law. It is in this spirit of public ownership and public trust that we offer the following Principles of Public Information.

1. The public has the right of access to public information.

Government agencies should guarantee open, timely and uninhibited access to public information except where restricted by law. People should be able to access public information, regardless of its format, without any special training or expertise.

2. The Federal Government should guarantee the integrity and preservation of public information, regardless of its format.

By maintaining public information in the face of changing times and technologies, government agencies assure the government's accountability and the accessibility of the government's business to the public.

3. The Federal Government should guarantee the dissemination, reproduction, and redistribution of public information.

Any restriction of dissemination or any other function dealing with public information must be strictly defined by law.

4. The Federal Government should safeguard the privacy of persons who use or request information, as well as persons about whom information exists in government records.

5. The Federal Government should ensure a wide diversity of sources of access, private as well as governmental, to public information.

Although sources of access may change over time and because of advances in technology, government agencies have an obligation to the public to encourage diversity.

6. The Federal Government should not allow cost to obstruct the people's access to public information.

Costs incurred by creating, collecting and processing information for the government's own purposes should not be passed on to people who wish to utilize public information.

7. The Federal Government should ensure that information about government information is easily available and in a single index accessible in a variety of formats.

The government index of public information should be in addition to inventories of information kept within individual government agencies.

8. The Federal Government should guarantee the public's access to public information, regardless of where they live and work, through national networks and programs like the Depository Library Program.

Government agencies should periodically review such programs as well as the emerging technology to ensure that access to public information remains inexpensive and convenient to the public.

Conclusion

The National Commission on Libraries and Information Science offers these Principles of Public Information as a foundation for the decisions made throughout the Federal Government and the nation regarding issues of public information. We urge all branches of the Federal Government, state and local governments and the private sector to utilize these principles in the development of information policies and in the creation, use, dissemination and preservation of public information. We believe that in so acting, they will serve the best interests of the nation and the people in the Information Age.

Adopted by the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science June 29, 1990